

Vítězslav Nezval and Jindřich Štyrský. *Edition 69*. Translated by Jed Slast. Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2004. 134 pages, \$16.50 (cloth).

This translation brings together two out of six slim volumes edited by Jindřich Štyrský, one of the foremost Czech visual artists of the interwar period, and published privately under the series title *Edition 69* in the early 1930s. The nature of this series is best described by Štyrský himself: “*Edition 69* will bring out works of outstanding literary merit and be an album of graphic art that will have long-lasting artistic value. [...] The names of the poets, writers, artists, and translators should dispel any suspicion that I wish to disseminate illicit, worthless pornography [...]” (128). Characterized by “artistic value” yet sexually explicit, sexually explicit yet not “worthless pornography,” *Edition 69* is perhaps best understood as occupying that exploratory zone of contact between Surrealism and erotica or pornography most often associated with the name of George Bataille. The titles Štyrský chose for inclusion in this short-lived publishing venture included classics of the literature of transgression, such as de Sade and Aretino, as well as contemporary works by writers associated with the Czech avant-garde. The present English translation brings together two of the latter works: Nezval’s “Sexual Nocturne” and Štyrský’s “Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream.”

The issue of classification is one of the most interesting raised by Štyrský’s project and is one that clearly caused him some anxiety (as the quotations above reveal). The term “erotica,” with its connotation of soft-focus indulgence, hardly fits Nezval’s semi-autobiographical description of early adolescent sexual unease in a small Moravian town. And while Štyrský’s collage illustrations for his own short text utilized pictures

cut out from pornographic magazines, the image (for example) of a half-naked woman juxtaposed with a rotting skeleton brandishing a huge penis shows that *Edition 69* is also not “pornography” in the usual sense. In the postscript to Štyrský’s text, the Surrealist psychoanalytic theorist Bohuslav Brouk proposes the term “pornophilic art”, aimed in equal measure against the prudish mores of the “moribund bourgeoisie” (111) and against the “instant gratification” sought by the “titillating, kitschified mode” (115) of pornography, which he views as facets of the same phenomenon. Noteworthy is the discipline Brouk demands of the transgressions of this pornophilic art: rather than invoking the release of shackled imaginative energy, as one might expect, Brouk claims that “the sublimation of the neurotic libido is creative” and that “divesting ourselves of all prejudice, we should evaluate pornophilic works strictly on their artistic value” (114). The appeals to free expression or liberated libido familiar from later defenders of pornography thus have little hold on Brouk, who rather regards pornophilic art as one front in a disciplined revolutionary struggle.

Nezval’s “Sexual Nocturne” illustrates one of the striking features of these pornophilic texts themselves. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on the erotics of the naked word. The tales and situations Nezval relates in this semi-autobiography are banal enough: peeping at couples having sex in the house across the street, masturbating in a public passageway, visiting a brothel. But Nezval is more interested in how the libidinal energy generated by the mere repetition of explicit or forbidden words becomes poetry: “FUCK is diamond-hard, translucent, a classic. As if taking on the appearance of a jewel from a graceful Alexandrine, it has, since it is forbidden, a magical power. It is one of the Kabbalistic abbreviations for erotic aura, and I love it” (33). Later we read: “I

said it to myself: BORDELLO. Over and over I said it: BORDELLO, BORDELLO, BORDELLO, BORDELLO” (46). A more blunt declaration of linguistic eroticism is difficult to imagine. On the other hand, however, Nezval’s text leans heavily on visual allusion. Not, as one might expect, on allusions to explicit or forbidden scenes, but rather to modernist visual codes. Describing the town square (the scene of his adolescent fantasizing) Nezval states that “the whole scene appeared cubist” (15). Describing the brothel he finally forces himself to enter, he writes: “it had the archaic charm of a Max Ernst collage of engravings” (34), and for good measure describes the prostitute herself as resembling “all the women from the xylographic illustrations in these pulp novels” (49)—that is, precisely the sort of just-archaic material so common in a Max Ernst collage. What makes these ekphrastic moments all the more interesting is that Nezval’s text is accompanied by Štyrský’s illustrations, so strongly reminiscent of Ernst collages. Thus a very self-conscious Surrealist drapery veils Nezval’s explorations of the naked poetic word.

While the visual arts of Czech Surrealism have attracted increasing attention recently, very little Czech Surrealist literature has been translated, and from that perspective the present book is a welcome corrective. Jed Slast’s translations are dependable and readable, and he has also provided an Afterword that will help readers unfamiliar with Czech modernism situate these texts. Strictly speaking these texts pre-date (although clearly anticipate) the foundation of the Czech Surrealist Group, and one might ask whether other, more representative works might not have been chosen. “Sexual Nocturne” is not one of Nezval’s most important texts, and the transgressive sexuality embraced in *Edition 69* is not only long familiar to contemporary readers but

also, as so often with Surrealist erotica, at times drearily boyish. Nonetheless, by translating the text (as well as some relevant dream journals) accompanying Štyrský's well-known collage cycle to "Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream," and especially by providing what is, as far as I am aware, the first translation of any text by the fascinating and under-recognized writer Bohuslav Brouk, this volume provides a valuable service.

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